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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [MU](#)  
SUBJECT: OMAN: SHARP REACTION TO POPE'S REMARKS

REF: A. MUSCAT 1370  
[1](#)B. MUSCAT 222

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Pope Benedict's recent remarks on Islam elicited an unexpectedly strong reaction in the local press, Internet chatrooms, and general conversation. Omani papers have prominently highlighted international critical response to the papal comments, while editorials in Arabic state-owned daily "Oman" took the highly unusual step of chiding the Pope for adding to tensions between the West and the Islamic world. Post contacts have been surprised at the Omani reaction given the country's tendency to avoid or downplay controversial religious topics. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) In an uncharacteristically swift response to remarks recently delivered by Pope Benedict XVI regarding Islam, leading Arabic daily "Oman" - which as a government outlet generally reflects officially approved opinion - carried a front-page editorial on September 15 entitled "When Wisdom is Lost." In contrast to "wise people" who seek to promote religious understanding, the article stated, the Pope in his comments "added more fuel to the fire" igniting tensions between Western and Islamic cultures. The editorial warned that "these types of comments" might generate extremist reactions from both Christians and Muslims, and "provoke a chain reaction that may lead into catastrophe." An article in the September 18 edition of "Oman" (equally strongly worded, though buried inside the paper) by a professor at Sultan Qaboos University asserted that, "Muslims need to understand that the recent comments made by the Pope against Islam and the Prophet are part of the campaign against Islam and are not an isolated incident."

[1](#)3. (C) Apart from editorials, Omani dailies have given extensive coverage of the reaction to the Pope's remarks around the world (ref A). The English language daily "Times of Oman," for example, devoted a whole page on September 17 to news agency reports on the fallout from the papal address, as well as the Vatican's official clarification of the Pope's speech. This concentration of coverage on a single topic is extremely rare, and in terms of column inches, was not seen even at the height of the Danish cartoon controversy.

[1](#)4. (SBU) On the Internet, the controversy surrounding the Pope has sparked considerable activity in popular Omani Arabic-language web forum "Al Sablah" ([www.omania.net](http://www.omania.net)) with several separate message threads. Most participants denounced the Pope's statements concerning Islam; some speculated that President Bush or "Jewish influence" was behind the remarks. Posters to the site's English-language sister ([englishsabla.com](http://englishsabla.com)) were equally taken up by the topic, with Christian posters from outside Oman trying, mostly in

vain, to inject balance into what was otherwise a steady stream of denunciations of the Pope.

¶5. (C) A few post contacts have privately expressed their surprise over the extent and degree of reaction in Oman to the papal comments. Haider al-Lawati, Board Member of the Oman Journalist Association, told Pol/Econ Couns on September 17 that he had not anticipated the press attention devoted to the subject. "Usually we try not to dwell on these types of things too much," he stated. Lawati added that the controversy was a major source of conversation among Omanis. His surprise - at the public nature, rather than the content of the negative response - has been echoed by participants in one of this week's Public Affairs programs, one of whom jokingly congratulated the PAO for being "out of the line of fire on this one."

¶6. (C) Comment: Omani authorities are keen to promote moderate Islam and to cultivate an image of religious toleration. Controversial religious topics are generally avoided in the press, which toes the government line, and in official circles so as not to fan potentially extremist feelings. The media attention given to the Pope's remarks, including editorials at least informally sanctioned by the government, is accordingly out of step with usual Omani cautiousness. Some theorize that this may be in response to lingering public discontent over a perceived lack of official reaction to the Danish cartoons deemed insulting to Islam (ref B). End Comment.  
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